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Shatha Ali Alhawamdeh

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**Looking for the Arab(-American) Woman's Body**

**in Najla Said's *Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

By

Shatha Ali Alhawamdeh

May 2015  
Bridgewater State University

**Content and Style Approved By:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Kathleen Vejvoda, Chair of Thesis Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Jadwiga S. Smith, Thesis Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Joyce Rain Anderson, Thesis Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Looking for the Arab(-American) Woman's Body**  
**in Najla Said's *Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family***

Throughout her 2013 memoir *Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family*, Najla Said — daughter of famed postcolonial critic and activist Edward Said — tries to negotiate her troubled relationship to Arab identity, and specifically Palestinian identity, through her body and her notions of female beauty. Said's conflicted body image is influenced by contemporary Western standards for female beauty, but it also reflects her guilt and shame about her Arab background.

Born in 1974 and raised in Manhattan's Upper West Side, Najla Said is the daughter of Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said (1935-2003), a professor of English Literature at Columbia University and the figure whom many consider to be the father of postcolonialism. Edward Said is known for his study *Orientalism* (1978) and his many other works of postcolonial and literary criticism; he was also famous for his human-rights activism, particularly his support of Palestinian rights. But as Najla explains in her memoir, being Edward's daughter did not make it easy for her to understand her own ethnic identity or relationship to postcolonial politics. She frequently expresses her sense of her ethnic "Otherness" in terms of a bodily excess that she associates with being both female and Arab. She suffers during her adolescence because of her perception of her body as marked by dark skin, too much body fat, and dark and excessive hair. This conflict emerges in various forms throughout the memoir. It is not until she is in her early thirties, after her father's death, that Said develops a sense of peace and self-acceptance

about her “confused” Arab-American identity. Through her Arab-American theater group and other activities, she establishes solidarity with others whose ethnic and national identities do not fit into easily recognizable categories. By the end of the memoir she embraces the notion of being an “Other,” finding therapeutic comfort and artistic satisfaction in the autobiographical theatrical performances that form the basis of the memoir. But the status of Said’s body-image conflict is left ambiguous, and the memoir ends without resolving the troubling politics of body image for Arab(-American) women that Said engages with throughout.

Said admits that she has always had problems with body image and self-loathing. At age seventeen, in 1991, she develops anorexia nervosa: it “was something [she] had been building toward since childhood and middle school,” but it wasn’t until high school that she “put actual starvation into successful practice” (154). After her graduation from high school in June 1992 at eighteen years old, the Said family travels to the Middle East. This is Najla’s first visit to Palestine. Her father’s interactions and meditations on this journey were extensively covered by the Western media. For him, this visit is a bittersweet homecoming, but for his teenage daughter, it is a nightmare, an anxious and guilty period during which she feels increasingly isolated emotionally. Witnessing the humanitarian crisis in Palestine, and particularly the suffering of the children, she starts to imagine her self-starvation as a form of solidarity with them, and even martyrdom. She acknowledges that her obsession with thinness and her anxiety over her father’s chronic health problems contribute to her anorexia. But as I argue here, Said’s eating disorder is also a result of her shame and “confus[ion]” about her ethnic identity, which in her case is further complicated by issues of gender as well as social class. Unlike her brother Wadie, who was always more engaged with his father’s intellectual and political work and who is a professor and

human rights lawyer, Najla has struggled to figure out what her role should be as the daughter of a famous Arab intellectual and as a young Arab-American woman.

The Said family visited Gaza in the summer of 1992 largely because Edward, suffering from chronic leukemia and “suddenly aware of his mortality” (Said 156), longs to return to his homeland. Najla recounts how during this trip she was plunged into a crisis of self-loathing and guilt over the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza, especially the children. Among other experiences throughout the memoir in which Said’s body-image problems and her feelings about being Arab converge, I will examine this section of the memoir as a phantasmagoric experience that forces her to confront the divisions and contradictions in her own identity. Guilty about the degree to which “Palestine” is, for her, as alien as it is familiar, she starves herself, which only heightens her sense of isolation. She represents this journey as a descent into a hellish reality that exists in tension with her own privileged but “confused” upbringing.

Said copes with this crisis by identifying with the suffering Palestinian children. Like herself, she says, they have “no control over their surroundings” (165). The visit to Gaza reinforces her existing anorexia, justifying her self-starvation as a kind of suffering in solidarity: she says she wants to be a “martyr” and “feel the pain of these people” (174). This implies her feelings of guilt about being exempted from the conditions of the Palestinians living in the Middle East. At the same time, Said’s desire to suffer reveals that she longs to feel connected to her Palestinian background rather than to feel alienated from it (174).

Said's parents fail to notice her suffering, mainly because they have been concerned about issues more important to them, such as paying attention to Wadie's successes and to the political situation in the Middle East. When they do notice Najla's weight loss and excessive hairiness, they attribute these characteristics to her adolescence. However, when the family returns home from the Middle East to New York City, her condition has so deteriorated that they bring her to a pediatrician who diagnoses her with anorexia nervosa. Najla's parents are shocked that their daughter has this serious eating disorder, and her own dismissal of her doctor's concerns is directly related to the fact that her parents have ignored her situation.

Said's description of her adolescent experience in the doctor's office is one of the most memorable passages in the memoir, not only because it reveals how distorted her view of her body has become, but also because it clearly demonstrates how her illness is connected in large part to her self-loathing and shame about being an Arab:

The next week they sent me back to the shrink I hadn't seen since I was fourteen. He knew after five minutes of talking to me that I had what I knew I had: *anorexia nervosa*. The rest of the scenario played out like it would in an after-school special. He sent me with my parents to the best-known doctor in Adolescent Medicine in New York City, Dr. Andrea Marks. She examined me, weighed me, and asked about the tufts of fur on my back and arms. 'I'm just Arab,' I said, dismissing the assumption that the hair had grown there to keep me warm (for once, I knew that 'being Arab' could possibly work in my favor). She looked at me skeptically, gently put a hand on my back, and asked me to please dress. For a moment I was deeply moved; she had the most sincerely loving and caring expression on her face. (Said 186)

When the doctor asks Said about the hair on her body, she responds that it is because of her ethnicity: “I’m just Arab” (186). But Said has starved herself to the point that she has developed lanugo. The characteristics of this stage of “deep starvation” include “...a soft, downy, fine white/light hair that grows mainly on the arms, chest, back and face of individuals with eating disorders. The body grows lanugo as a means of insulating itself to maintain body temperature as fat stores are depleted. It is most commonly seen in patients with anorexia nervosa” (Eating Disorders Glossary). Said dismisses the medical explanation for these “tufts of fur,” which have grown on her body to keep her warm. Instead she associates the “fur” with her Arab background, an act of denial that reveals her self-hatred and exemplifies the connection we see throughout the memoir between her body-image problems and her ambivalence about “being Arab.”

This essay examines how Najla Said negotiates her ambivalence about Arab identity largely through her struggles with female body image. Said for the most part has an agonized body image since adolescence, frequently expressing self-loathing when she mentions her body fat and dark skin and hair. But as I will discuss, at other times she celebrates the image of the Arab woman as representing an “exotic” beauty (155). She is of course familiar with her father Edward Said’s famous postcolonial study *Orientalism*, which theorizes the Oriental as signifying an at once treacherous and alluring Otherness for Western cultures. Within the first several pages of her memoir, Said refers to *Orientalism* as “the book that everyone reads at some point in college, whether in history, politics, Buddhism, or literature class. He wrote it when I was four” (Said 5). Here Said includes the “simple” definition of Orientalism that she demanded from her father at one point. She then includes a well-known, contemporary example of Orientalism:

As he explained once, when I pressed him to put it into simple English: ‘The basic concept, is that ... historically, through literature and art, the ‘East,’ as seen through a Western lens, becomes distorted and degraded so that anything ‘other’ than what we Westerners recognize as familiar is not just exotic, mysterious, and sensual but also inherently inferior.’

You know, like Aladdin. (Said 5)

The story of Aladdin and his magic lamp is one of the tales from *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights*. But a well known version of the tale in contemporary Western culture is Disney’s *Aladdin* (1992), which came out during a very tumultuous and difficult year for Najla Said personally: she was eighteen, had recently developed a serious case of anorexia nervosa, and was travelling in the Middle East with her family, a journey documented in great detail by the press. This was the trip that included her nightmarish visit to Gaza. The sentence “You know, like Aladdin” is not in quotes, so it sounds like it could be Najla’s own comparison; but it is not clear here whether this voice is her own or her father’s. We do not know whether she made this connection herself, or whether her father referred to it to help her to understand. But the fact that Najla wants the version of her father’s theory in “simple English” and that she includes this reference to a popular Disney film shows that she recognizes the importance of popular culture in propagating Orientalist stereotypes about Arab identity. Najla’s concern about the Orientalists’ view of women is based on the fact they while they portrays themselves as experts, most often they have not traveled to the East, but more importantly, they have based their judgments on myth, stereotypes, and false ideas and images of Middle Eastern women.



Interestingly, Said next summarizes in a series of short paragraphs how different people have defined her father and his work:

It's mainly because of my father that people now say 'Asian American' instead of 'Oriental.'

To *other* people, he is the symbol of Palestinian self-determination, a champion of human rights, equality, and social justice. A 'humanist' who 'spoke truth to power.'

And then still other people insist he was a terrorist, though anyone who knew him knows that's kind of like calling Gandhi a terrorist.

To me, he was my daddy, a dapper man in three-piece suits tailor-made in London. A cute old guy who yelled at me passionately in his weird sometimes British, sometimes American accent and then (five minutes later) forgot he had been upset; the one who brought me presents from all over the world, talked to me about *Jane Eyre*—my favorite book when I was twelve—and held me when I cried. He played tennis and squash, drove a Volvo, smoked a pipe, and collected pens. He was a professor. He was my father. (Said 5-6; her emphasis)

Said provides only short paragraphs, in most cases only a sentence, to what "other people," no matter who they were, thought of her father. She then goes on to describe in loving detail her own memories of who Edward Said was to her. Throughout the memoir we can sense admiration but also some resentment regarding her father's public image, including after his death, when she is offended by strangers who think they somehow share her loss (241-242). One of Said's purposes in her memoir seems to be to reclaim the private Edward Said from the public realm, to reclaim her father for herself.

But Said's uncomfortable or "confused" relationship to postcolonial politics and to Palestine makes this a difficult task. It is notable that she remembers the period when her father was writing *Orientalism* (when she was only four) as an anxious time:

I always considered myself a 'daddy's girl,' and he would have agreed. Daddy and I were temperamental soul mates: artistic, dramatic, needy, sensitive, and completely inept at mundane tasks such as paying bills or even opening them. But as a child, I was in fact completely awed by and maybe even scared of Daddy. I have really strong memories of being petrified when the door of his study was closed and I would hear the furious click-clack-*ding* of his IBM typewriter. [...] [A]ll I knew was that, when he was in there, I was afraid. And when he emerged, there would be a moment of apprehension; I'd feel out his mood, and usually, if I was lucky, he'd shower me with love and praise in his uniquely expressive and melodic voice. (Said 6)

Here she wants to emphasize how similar she is to her father and how much they shared; but his work, particularly his writing of what many regard to be his most important book, creates a barrier between them. The door is literally closed, and she is "petrified," "afraid," "apprehensi[ve]." As a child she felt frightened of her father's unpredictable "mood[s]." She ends this recollection by emphasizing something positive, her father "shower[ing]" her with his affection and approval. She loves her father but there is also "apprehension" around her memories.

At times in her memoir, particularly once she reaches high school and her later teenage years, Najla Said both embraces and manipulates the Orientalist notion of the exotic and mysterious Arab woman. She does so self-consciously and, I argue, as an act of independence and self-

assertion. Her negotiation of Arab female beauty is one of the most problematic and interesting aspects of her memoir.

Najla's father, Edward Said, exposed and challenged the imperialist and racist Western discourse of "Orientalism," which constructs Asians, Arabs, and various peoples of the Middle East and North Africa as all fundamentally similar in their Otherness. In the West, Edward Said argues, "Oriental" subjects have been dehumanized as inferior — dishonest, treacherous, and slavish — and at the same time essentialized as mysterious and exotic. He insisted that we recognize the range of ethnic identities in what was formerly referred to as "the Orient"; his argument is the main reason why today we refer to "Arab-Americans" or "Asian-Americans" rather than to "Orientals." In his home life, however, at least according to Najla's loving but sometimes frustrated representations of her father, Edward appears to be rather self-involved, not noticing his daughter's problems with her ethnic identity and eventually her eating disorder.

In addition to having such a notable father, Najla represents her mother Mariam as an impressive woman, a Lebanese-American who is well educated and who managed all the household affairs, while Edward was often overwhelmed by the demands and details of everyday life. From early in her memoir Said emphasizes her mother's beauty, elegance, and thinness. Both Edward and Mariam Said were raised as Christians, the Episcopal church being the closest her family ever comes to aligning itself with any religious institution. But Najla and her brother Wadie have a completely secular upbringing. Her parents are passionate about politics and intellectual and cultural pursuits. Unlike Wadie, Najla has difficulty sharing her parents' interest in colonial oppression and postcolonial politics, even though she describes how, as a child, she experiences

many examples of racism due to her Arab background. Throughout the memoir she describes her “confus[ion]” about her Arab-American identity, exploring what it means to be not just Arab but, in particular, Palestinian and Lebanese. Her struggles with her identity are aggravated by the fact that she is trying fit in with other girls living in New York, many of whom are either Jewish or of WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) background. She feels pressure to conform to American culture, and also to American standards of physical appearance; as a girl and later as a young woman, she suffers because she feels that her appearance — which she equates with her ethnic difference, with “being Arab” — makes it impossible for her to fit in with the other girls. Her main purpose in the memoir is to find an identity that she feels comfortable with, one that she sees as truly reflecting her experience. Eventually she embraces the contradictions and “otherness” of her Arab-American identity, but not until after many years of secret anguish, particularly during childhood and adolescence.

Said first begins to realize the physical and cultural differences between her and her American classmates when she is only six years old. By the end of first grade, she comes to see herself as “fat, big, hairy, and weird” (Said 59). The students at her school in New York City are mostly Jewish, and Said struggles to fit in because of her dark hair, Arab name, and Palestinian and Lebanese ethnicity. She becomes versed in Jewish-American culture, eating bagels and lox on the weekend (128). As a child, Said says, she desperately wanted to be the same as her Jewish friends. She explains that her father is tolerated and has Jewish friends despite his politics and criticisms of Israel. For example, she mentions that he would keep track of all the Jewish holidays and say “*Happy Simchat Torah!*” to his Jewish friends (128-129). At school, Said celebrates most of the Jewish occasions and she knows more about them than about her own

ethnic traditions. Ironically, many people see her as a Sephardic Jew, and Said doesn't correct them.

Still unaware of the political turmoil in Palestine and the war in Lebanon (56), she feels as a child that her Jewish friends' families would be mortified if she were to tell them the truth about her Palestinian and Lebanese heritage. Growing up in the United States, Said is uncomfortable about her real identity and tries to hide it because of the negative images and stereotypes about Arabs portrayed in the American media. Said observes that on television Arabs are depicted as brown-skinned, Muslims, belly dancers, fanatics, or terrorists (52,82). Consequently, when she is quite young she decides that it would be best to hide any evidence of her Arab identity and try to appear to be as American as possible. To be "American," in her experience, means to be not Arab.

At the same time, as Said is growing up she loves Lebanon and her Lebanese heritage: she enjoys spending time during the summers in Beirut, where her mother's extended family lives. She loves the food and the warm welcome that she receives there, and the conversation and laughter. But back home in New York she is still ashamed of saying that she is an Arab, even after her enjoyable visit to Lebanon in the summer of 1979, when she is five years old:

I was happy to see Jiddo Emile and to be back in my favorite place. I loved to sit with him at the dining room table every morning and watch him peel a hard-boiled egg and then mash it into his *labane*, strained yogurt, with *za'atar* and *zeit*, thyme and olive oil. I'd eat my Frosties and ask him questions about the chickens on the roof of the building next door. We lived in a modern building on a modern street, but for some reason there

was an old house across the street with chickens and lambs and pigeons on the roof. I was entranced by this bizarre view into the home of our neighbors, who seemed to live in a storybook. I loved that Beirut seemed so much like New York most of the time, but every so often I would notice something magical about the place, like a farm animals on roofs, or houses with big gates and enormous trees right next to a hotel or a super market.

Everyone in Beirut had a balcony off each room (Teta Hilda called them “verandas”). I wish we had one in New York. We had only fire escapes, and the only people who ever used them, according to Nick, our elevator man, were robbers. (36-37)

At various points throughout the memoir, Said reminisces about her mother’s homeland: “I adored ‘Beirut,’ as the whole country was known to me, and I adored the days we spent there. [...] To me, Beirut was love and grandparents” (32-33). She loves the memory of being surrounded by her family and relatives there: “It seemed like wherever I went in Lebanon, all my grandparents and all my cousins, aunts, and uncles were there too. It was fantastic” (35). As I will discuss later, Said also shares her experience of being afraid while she was in her grandparents’ house for a week during the war between the Israeli and the Lebanese.

Said grows up during a period of political turmoil and war in the Middle East, and she has a difficult time reconciling her image of family comfort in Lebanon with the repulsion her friends in New York openly express about Lebanon and about Arabs in general. A major factor that causes Said to hide her Arab identity while she is growing up is the civil war in Lebanon, which began in 1975 when said was one year old and lasted until 1990:

Unfortunately, my heightened and growing awareness of my physical awkwardness coincided perfectly with the growing violence and political instability in the Middle East.

As the '80s continued on, the region in general and Lebanon in particular became synonymous with all that was uncivilized, evil, barbaric, violent, and foreign in the world. I tried desperately to fit in at school but at the same time to remain loyal to all that I treasured and loved about my home and my family. I gleaned from both pop culture and my friends' offhanded comments that I ought to *avoid* being connected to Beirut as it appeared on television and in the movies [...]. (Said 82; her emphasis)

Because of the news reports about the civil war giving Lebanon a bad reputation, and later the war between Israel and Lebanon in 1982, Said begins to shy away from anything that ties her to Lebanon or being Arab.

Despite the fact that she tries so hard to hide or downplay her Arab identity while growing up, Said still experiences racism on a number of occasions, and these incidents disturb her deeply. At the age of seventeen, for example, when she is returning from a family trip to France, she is pulled aside at the airport and questioned about her family's origins as if she is dangerous person. Her friends' reassurances provide little comfort: "You're so not Arab, Najla! You don't even look it!" (152). In 1992, the following summer, Said goes with her family to Palestine after her father is diagnosed with leukemia. At this time Said is eighteen years old. This visit enables her to learn more about Palestine and confront the reality of the appalling conditions there.

Although Said points out that she first developed anorexia after her father was diagnosed with leukemia when she was seventeen, her anorexia worsens dramatically on this visit to Palestine, particularly when the Said family visits a refugee camp in Gaza. As I will discuss, this section is the crisis of the memoir, and it is here that she details the horrible conditions in Gaza and, at the same time, highlights her struggle with anorexia, drawing an unlikely parallel between the two.

During this same period and soon after, while she is in college, Said begins to claim her ethnic and gendered identity by drawing on Orientalist notions of Arab womanhood. She says that it is better to see oneself as “exotic” and “mysterious” than as “weird” (Said 130). As I will discuss later, by embracing the exoticism associated with the Orientalist construction of Arab female identity, Said begins, for the first time, to construct a distinct identity for herself — one that is to a certain extent in conflict with the postcolonial politics of her father (155).

The gender difference between Najla and her only sibling, her brother Wadie, is also significant because as a girl, Najla experiences different pressures both within and outside of the family. This leads to differences in how each of the Said siblings approaches their father’s legacy and in particular the politics of postcolonialism and Palestine. Wadie went to an all-boys’ school—Trinity School—that was on the Upper West Side; it was more diverse than Najla’s school, the all-girls’ Chapin School in Manhattan. While Wadie grows more satisfied with his Arab identity even though he is surrounded by many Jewish classmates, Najla does not feel confident. She writes, “...as I grew increasingly embarrassed by our background, Wadie grew more defiantly proud of it” (69). When he goes to Princeton, he understands and embraces his Arab identity and his father’s political views more than she does: “Unlike Wadie, I didn’t really care about politics and history, and I couldn’t fully express myself in the [Arabic] language” (198). While they both want to emulate their father, Najla chooses a career as an artist, whereas Wadie is more of a political activist than she is. Najla describes the ease with which her brother expresses himself: “He had joined my parents comfortably straddling the line between the East and the West, and left me standing alone and lost, in America” (158).



The events of 9/11 were also of course a major factor in determining the paths each sibling would take. Najla was 27 in 2001. Her father was very sick at the time and had been for years; he died two years later. So within a two-year period when she was still forming her adult identity, she had to cope with the crisis in Arab-American identity that followed 9/11 as well as the death of her father. She emphasizes the therapeutic benefits of her experience as an actress and of joining of Arab theater clubs, especially after her father's death. Actively communicating with her Arab counterparts helped her to finally reach a point of acceptance about her own Arab-American identity. Events after 9/11 played an effective role in that as well: "In the wake of 9/11, after procrastinating for months, Said found the courage to join an Arab-American theatre group. She found renewed pride in her identity, and ultimately wrote the play this memoir is based on" (Izenberg).

Said's memoir is very different from her father's postcolonial literary and cultural criticism. Frykholm argues that "Anyone turning to this book looking for Najla to carry on her father's political legacy is looking in the wrong place. Najla establishes her own voice, which is light, funny, balanced and self-deprecating. She tries to get her reader to see the world from the perspective of a young child growing up in a sophisticated and complicated world beyond her comprehension" (52). In addition, Bostrom states that "Although those with stakes in any of Said's backgrounds will have a more pointed interest in her explorations, most readers will relate to her ultimately universal discussion of growing up 'other.' Said's memoir is both a dear tribute to her father's work and proof that acceptance of one's roots—the hurdle to success and success itself—is most always hard earned" (3). Hartley claims that Said wrote her book "to remind

those of us, the next generation, whether we are Palestinian or not, that we have all of the tools we need to continue this struggle for a just peace” (50). She adds that that Said has a “great faith in the coming generations of young people, whatever their identity as Americans and as immigrants to this country, in terms of fighting for equality and justice for Palestine” (Hartley 50).

While reviewers of the memoir have noted her troubled identity as an Arab-American and her close relationship to her father, none have observed the persistent and almost insidious link in Said’s memoir between female body image, largely driven by Western notions of female beauty but now disseminated throughout the world, and Arab identity. For Said, her “confused” and agonized relationship to what it means to be Arab-American, and particularly Palestinian-American, is both a gendered and an embodied experience. In the next section I will examine how Arab womanhood has been imagined in Orientalist discourse and consider the ways in which these stereotypes persist in Western popular culture, so that we can understand what Najla Said means when she refers to the exotic Arab woman and consider the potentially troubling implications of invoking such imagery in her memoir: “Though the word ‘exotic’ had begun to replace the word ‘weird’ as the main adjective people used to describe my difference, I was still not fully accepted as American, and if I were going to live up to being ‘exotic,’ I had to be perfectly so” (155).

### **Orientalism and the Arab Woman's Body**

For hundreds of years in the West, Arabs have been represented by the Orientalist stereotypes that Edward Said has lectured on and written about extensively: “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2). Said defines Orientalism as “...a Western Style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Said argues further:

[T]he Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience [...]. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. (E. Said 1-2)

In addition to the importance that Edward Said ascribes to Orientalism, Naber argues that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Orientalism continues to be relevant and important in social and political discourse.

Naber points out that contemporary Western culture “relies on representations of culture (Arab) and Islam as a justification for post-cold war imperial expansion in the Middle East and the targeting of people perceived to fit the racial profile of a potential terrorist living in the United States—Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslims” (81). This enduring Orientalist perception leads to the labeling of people from the East as “Other.” In their examination of how Middle Easterners live in and are treated in America, Marvasti and McKinney support this thesis:

One way in which the casting aside of minorities is achieved by a dominant group is through the process of “othering.” According to sociologists, othering takes on forms such as: (a) presenting the other’s differences as a shortcoming (e.g., being a minority is a deficit that has to be overcome, rather than just difference or possibly an asset); (b) objectification of the other (e.g., treating women and their bodies as sexual objects rather than treating women as persons); (c) presenting the familiar self as more superior and powerful than the other (e.g., suggesting that the whites are inherently more intelligent than other groups); and (d) the assumption of the oppressive identity by the other (e.g., when the Iranian Americans belittle Arab Americans for being terrorists). (69)

Marvasti and McKinney add, “What all these processes have in common is the creation of an inferior identity that can be used by the dominant group to economically and culturally exploit a subordinate group and deny them equal rights” (69). In her memoir Najla Said verifies this through her own experience and gives examples of the way Arab-Americans are treated as “Other.” Because of differences in appearance, customs, rituals, religions, language, and culture, any segment of society not belonging to the dominant group — that is, not just Arab-Americans but other minority groups as well — are treated as outcasts. The process of “othering” marginalizes any minority group and subordinates them and often negates the rights to which they are entitled. Consequently, prejudice paves the way to stereotyping, treating them as inferior, and discriminating against them.

Reviewing Jack Shaheen’s study *The TV Arab*, Cheney observes that “the Arab has been the subject of many myths and misperceptions. Current television writers and producers have relied on four basic myths in developing their characterizations of Arabs: Arabs are fabulously wealthy,

they are barbaric and uncultured, they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery, and they revel in acts of terrorism” (363). These ideas are essentially similar to Edward Said’s argument about Orientalism, which emphasizes the ways in which Europeans associated Arabs with both barbarism and sexual license. Najla Said similarly observes in her memoir that the Western media depicts Arabs as “dark,” “dangerous,” “terrorists,” and “evil” (Said 126, 52).

Marvasti and McKinney point out that “Because of stereotypical ideas about what Islam means, Muslim Americans sometimes face prejudice and discrimination” (28). After the attacks of 9/11 Arab-Americans were subjected to ethnic profiling because “the notion of the American community has been defined in response to the terrorist attacks in a way that portrays Middle Easterners and Muslims as dangerous outsiders” (Marvasti and McKinney 70). In addition, the terrorist acts committed in the United States by a group of terrorists have played a crucial role in profiling and labeling Middle Eastern Americans as terrorists: “Turmoil in the Middle East and acts of terrorism committed in the United States by Middle Easterners have created an identity crisis for those who were either born or have ancestry from that part of the world” (90). Their case is “similar to that of Japanese Americans in the first half of the twentieth century” (90).

Najla Said’s memoir focuses on her own “identity crisis” as a result of these issues, but her crisis about being Arab is also complicated by the fact that she is a woman. There are many stereotypes ascribed to Arab women. The two most common stereotypical images are the concubine (or harem woman), often conflated with the image of the belly dancer, and the veiled woman. The Arab woman as concubine/belly dancer has been a favorite trope of Orientalists for centuries. In *Orientalism* Edward Said discusses the ways in which French and British Orientalists in the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries imagined the Orient through literature and paintings. He devotes much attention to Oriental travel narratives and other works by nineteenth-century French writer Gustave Flaubert:

Woven through all of Flaubert's Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex. In making this association Flaubert was neither the first nor the most exaggerated instance of a remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes to the Orient. And indeed, the motif itself is singularly unvaried [...]. Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate: it is not the province of my analysis here, alas, despite its frequently noted appearance. (E. Said 188)

Said notes the link between Orientalist imagery and sex, but this aspect of the discourse of Orientalism, the one most relevant to the depiction of Arab women in Orientalist texts, is not what he wishes to pursue in detail. In his Oriental travel narratives, though, Flaubert describes “a famous Egyptian dancer and courtesan” named Kuchuk Hanem, whom he slept with and who “was surely the prototype of several of his novels’ female characters in her learned sensuality, delicacy, and (according to Flaubert) mindless coarseness” (186-7).

Said continues:

The Oriental woman is an occasion and opportunity for Flaubert's musings; he is entranced by her self-sufficiency, by her emotional carelessness, and also by what, lying next to him, she allows him to think. Less a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity, Kuchuk is the prototype of Flaubert's Salammbo and

Salomé, as well as of all the versions of carnal female temptation to which his Saint Anthony is subject. [...] Kuchuk is a disturbing symbol of fecundity, peculiarly Oriental in her luxuriant and seemingly unbounded sexuality. (E. Said 187)

Said sheds light on one of the more familiar Orientalist stereotypes of the Arab woman—as belly dancer. This is a prototype for the “carnal” woman whose lust is as great as the man’s. She is both temptress and seducer as well as the one who desires sexual satisfaction. Malek Alloula’s book is a pictorial presentation and a narration about the French soldiers who went to Algeria. This colonized country that served as a penal colony for France was also a place where women could be used for sexual satisfaction. Alloula argues that the soldiers and their photographers justified their actions because their own women were absent. Thus the Algerian women were “substitutes” and they dressed them as models to serve their own political and personal objectives: “The model presents three distinct and closely related advantages: *accessible*, *credible*, and *profitable*” (E. Said 18). In collusion with the French colonizers, and in an effort to hide the genocide that was occurring, photographers posed local women as nudes or in provocative and sexually alluring positions in an attempt to entice men to come to Algiers where women were “*accessible*.” The women were dressed to portray fertility and unbounded sexuality. Edward Said’s examination of Flaubert illustrates how the Orientalists generalized their images of Arab women based on their musings, dreams, and communication with prostitutes to apply to all Arab women.

Said argues that “[i]n all of his novels Flaubert associates the Orient with the escapism of sexual fantasy” and that his characters “daydream” about “Oriental clichés: harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys, sherbets, ointments, and so on. [...] [O]nce again, the

association is clearly made between the Orient and the freedom of licentious sex” (E. Said 190).

Europeans saw the Orient, and in particular Arab cultures, as societies where sex was “free”:

“Just as the various colonial possessions—quite apart from their economic benefit to metropolitan Europe—were useful as places to send wayward sons, superfluous populations of delinquents, poor people, and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe” (190).

Western or Orientalist assumptions about Arabs and their lifestyles are still disseminated through the media, often containing images that distort reality for women and men. For example, women are associated with “belly dancer’s outfit, headdresses (which look like tablecloths pinched from restaurants), veils, sunglasses, flowing gowns and robes,” and men with “oil wells, limousines, and/or camels” (Cheney 363). Croutier argues that popular culture, including television commercials, plays a major role in carrying on Orientalist stereotypes that essentialize Arabs, especially Arab women:

More commercial enterprises include Hugh Hefner’s Playboy mansion, where live in ‘bunnies’ abound to fulfill the master’s wishes. In novels and films, James Bond has represented the male fantasy of possessing a multitude of beautiful and adoring women and, on the seamier side, the pornography market is flooded with bondage magazines and paraphernalia, which in essence are versions of the slave-master rituals. There is, finally, no better way to sell a product than to show a man surrounded and adored by sexy women. In these days, then, concubines and harems still exist as part of contemporary Western society. (Croutier 202)



The West has adopted Orientalist fantasies in its own culture. Orientalism's highly sexualized image of Arab women is still disseminated through media fantasies invoking harem imagery. As Croutier argues, echoing Edward Said's original claim: "most Orientalist artists merely dreamed; they created their visions of the Orient without ever leaving their home country" (173). The Orient was something mysterious and unknown to them, a way to exercise their imaginations. Orientalist painting was also influenced by stories such as *The Arabian Nights* or *One Thousand and One Nights*, which was very popular in Europe since it was first translated from Arabic in the early eighteenth century. An obsession with the exotic and mysterious "East" colored the European imagination of the Orient. Croutier claims that in the twentieth century "a new visual and commercial art, film, was capitalizing on the public's perpetual fascination with images Oriental. Now harem beauties could be seen actually shaking their hips and rattling their breasts. Handsome sheiks ravaged these odalisques, reinforcing the myth of women's need to be possessed" (198). However, in contemporary Arab cultures Orientalist fantasies are seen as European inventions; they seem exotic and strange.

But the Western representation of Arab and Muslim women that dominates modern media is the veiled woman. In this image, the veil is seen by others, specifically non-Muslims, as a tool of oppression, making Arab-Muslim women invisible, passive, and powerless. While in the West the veil is perceived to be an obstacle for Arab women, one that forces them to hide themselves, many Arab women see this notion as far from the truth; in fact many see the veil as empowering. Referring to a Reebok ad from 2001 in which a woman is hidden behind a veil, Jarmakani argues:

In modern texts, the association of oppression or submission with Arab and Muslim women's bodies is so powerful that it even withstands internal contradictions. The Reebok advertisement, for example, does not offer a completely simplistic representation of Arab womanhood as silent and oppressed. Instead, in the act of appropriation of the seemingly fixed image of Arab women as victims of cultural oppression, it adds another dimension of interpretation and meaning. (Jarmakani 157)

At first glance, Westerners might see the woman as veiled and assume oppression, while the Arab-Muslim women might readily focus first on her "confrontational" stance and her "active" involvement with the viewer (157). Hence Arab-Muslim women see her as powerful and self-asserting rather than as powerless.

As Jarmakani states, "While the representations and meanings of the veil are fluid, however, the impulse to co-opt the veil and to transform it into a cultural mythology seems not to be" (157). The media in the West in film, television, and print almost uniformly present the veiled woman as traditional, even though many consider themselves as anything but traditional. They may see their choice of wearing the veil as representing their desire to be seen as a modern Muslim who is devoted, but not as being unintelligently submissive to others. They may be studying to become leaders in their culture, and potential agents of change.

Jarmakani also claims that "As with the signifier of the harem in the French colonial context, the symbol of the veil serves important purposes for the project of U.S imperialism: it demonstrates the supposed inferiority of the Arab males' excessive patriarchy and therefore functions as an

implicit justification for U.S Military action” (159). These assumptions, seemingly, have been utilized in order to benefit particular political agendas.

Harik and Marston argue that “Islam calls for both men and women to dress modestly—yet today all the emphasis is on women covering themselves” (92). This dualism is not unlike the double standard that exists in the West in terms of being sexually active. Vrangalova (2014) reviews two studies on whether the sexual double standard still exists. A survey that professors have for the past 23 years given to Illinois State University students enrolled in a human sexuality course has recently found the following:

Although casual sex in general became slightly more acceptable over time, there was no change in the endorsement of the double standard, calculated as participants’ rating of casual sex acceptability for men minus their rating for women. No change whatsoever. Students considered casual sex less acceptable for women than for men in 2012 just as much as they did in 1990. (n.p.)

Harik and Marston explain that “Both in the West and in much of the Middle East, veiling is the popular word for a woman concealing her hair and body, and sometimes her face, for religious reasons. A more accurate term, however, is hijab, which means simply cover. Although in the past Christian and Jewish women also covered in public, the custom is now primarily Islamic” (84). They also add that the holy book of Islam, the Qur’an,

calls upon all believers, men and women, to behave and dress in a modest fashion.

The most specific instruction the Qur’an gives to women is as follows: they should lower their gaze [for men as well (author’s addition)], draw their veils over their bosoms, and reveal their adornments only to the men [a father, husband,

brothers, sons, uncles, grandfathers, nephews, and father-in-law (author's addition)] and other women in their own households. (84)

Harik and Marston point out that there are different interpretations to the meaning of “adornments” that could mean “jewelry and hair or the natural beauty of a woman’s face and figure” (84). Thus, a Muslim woman’s “assertion of her religious identity inspire[s] her to put on the veil” if she feels she wants to be devoted to God (92). Misconceptions about the meaning of the hijab and the motivations for wearing it leads to many Orientalist stereotypes about Muslim women.

Najla Said is Arab, but not Muslim; even so, the stereotype of the veiled woman still affects her life as an Arab-American. Many people might assume she is Muslim even if she does not wear a veil; and it is significant, I think, that after 9/11 she chose to wear a cross to distinguish herself from other Arab women. This shows how pervasive the assumption is that Arab means Muslim, and also how uncomfortable Said was with that assumption.

### **The Arab Woman’s Body in *Looking for Palestine***

Throughout her memoir, Said is obsessed with the American cultural ideal of female beauty, which celebrates thinness and blondness. She observes these physical characteristics in her American friends and peers at school, and during her childhood and youth her tendency to compare herself with them warps her view of her own body, eventually contributing to her development of anorexia nervosa in her late teens.

Said describes her mother as nurturing but also elegant in way that was unattainable for herself. Early in the memoir it seems as if she contrasts her mother's steadiness against her father's loving but sometimes frightening eccentricity: "My mother is the beautiful, kind woman who took care of me" (Said 6). Said describes how she was captivated by her mother's beauty when she was a child. It is obvious that her mother was a role model for her, representing the ideal feminine body: "My mother was the most beautiful lady to walk the earth, and when my parents dressed up to go out at night, her glamour and perfection took my breath away. She was perfectly skinny, 115 pounds, I knew, and I was captivated by her beauty and elegance and thinness" (11). Said here invokes the concept of perfection more than once ("perfection," "perfectly"), associating it with thinness.

Said later contradicts herself, however, saying that her mother isn't "perfect" in the way that the blond women are. Her mother offers a counterexample to the white standard of beauty, but perhaps Said overcompensates in her praise of her mother because she is ashamed for feeling that she does not represent this Western ideal of beauty: "Of course, I thought my real, brunette mother was beautiful and perfect, but in a different way. And anyway, on TV and in my books, and according to many Barbies, the most beautiful people and the princesses were always blond. Real people, boring people, and evil people were brunettes. Blondes were not real people; they were fantasy people, TV people" (29). Her mother may be thin and elegant, but her dark hair sets her apart from mainstream American notions of beauty. In other places in the memoir, she emphasizes her embarrassment at her mother's thick Lebanese accent. As a girl, Said is obsessed with the image of slender blonde beauty found in American movies and magazines, and by the

age of six she already hates her appearance: “[B]y the end of first grade, my self-image had been translated into ‘fat, big, hairy, and weird’” (Said 59). By the time she is in her teens, her shame about her body is distinctly connected to her shame about being Arab.

Eating disorders are not only common in the United States but are also found in the Arab world. Because of globalization, Arab women are also influenced by the Western emphasis on thinness. Aisha Hamdan argues that

although research in the area is very limited, eating disorders seem to be an emerging physical and mental health problem for women within the Arab region. Studies that have been conducted have found abnormal eating attitudes and excessive concerns about weight and shape among young females in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Egypt, Jordan, and Qatar. (599)

Hamdan also states that the mass media, Western influences, internalization of the thin ideal and drive for thinness, and knowing someone on a diet may be important risk factors in the development of eating disorders (599).

As a child, Said compares herself to the other girls at school and starts to conflate her anxiety about beauty and body image with her anxiety about other forms of difference, specifically her ethnic difference: “[A]s I grew older and progressed into the first, second, and third grades, a sense of shame about my differences — my hairy arms, my weird name, my family’s missing presence on the Social Register — took over my thoughts. My grandmother’s once ‘fancy’ accent began to sound simply ‘foreign’” (57). In the list of “differences” between Said and the girls at school, she begins with her Arab identity, constituted first through her body (“my hairy

arms”), then her ethnic or “weird” name; for her, being Arab is an embodied experience first, then a linguistic one. Notably, the third item on her list of “differences” is the Said “family’s missing presence on the Social Register,” or the fact that they are not really part of the elite social class in New York City in spite of her father’s success and fame. All of these factors reinforce Said’s self-loathing and shame about her Arab background.

Several studies indicate that one of the major reasons that motivate women to starve themselves is to get some kind of control over themselves. They feel that they cannot control anything else, so instead they control their bodies by starving them. Shurique argues that “eating disorders are most commonly found in the upper social classes of industrialized countries” (359). She also states that “being slim and fit is highly rated in western cultures where being thin apparently symbolizes certain cherished notions, such as social acceptance, self-discipline, self-control, sexual liberation, assertiveness, competitiveness and class” (359).

In her memoir, Said repeatedly acknowledges that while she was growing up she wished she were not Arab, but at times the intensity of her past self-loathing is quite remarkable and she seems to lack a degree of self-consciousness about that. As a child she starts to associate any aspect of her body or personality that makes her self-conscious with the idea of being “Arab,” and to account for every miserable experience she has, by saying to herself “I’m just Arab” (186). For example, when Said is diagnosed with anorexia, she doesn’t understand that the hair has appeared on her skin because she is starving and not because she is an Arab. But her assumption is revealing, as her illness is indeed related to her struggle with her Arab identity:

“‘I’m just Arab,’ I said, dismissing the assumption that the hair had grown there to keep me warm” (186).

Her classmates at school also play an indirect but crucial role in inducing her self-hatred. Constantly observing physical and other differences between herself and the rest of the girls at school, Said becomes self-conscious about being different from them and realizes that her family is also different from the American families of her friends. By the time she is six years old in 1980, Said sees herself as profoundly other or “weird”:

Every year at Chapin, we would be lined up in alphabetical order and sent down to the nurse’s office to be weighed and measured. One by one we’d step up onto the scale, and Mrs. Giusti would call out our weight for whoever was writing it down. Then we’d quickly turn our backs to be measured lengthwise, our height would be called out and registered, and we’d hop off into the huddle of our classmates:

‘What’s your weight, Najla?’

‘Seventy-five.’

‘Mine’s seventy.’

‘Oh.’

A newly weighed and measured girl would inevitably appear at that moment.

‘Hey!!! Mine’s seventy too!!’

‘Yay!!! Oh my God!!! We’re twins!!!’

One year, I spent the whole bus ride home staring at my thighs. I was mad at them for being so big. How was it that I was seventy-five pounds and one of my best friends was seventy-four, and she was taller than I was?



That's when I figured out what the real difference was between me and the other girls.

With my mop of tangled black hair, a deep, husky voice, and a faint mustache, with my far too heavy frame, I was obviously not a girl at all. I was a boy, or at least one gene away from it.

Thus it was in 1980, when I was six years old and in grade one, that my self-esteem began to slip. (Said 59)

As a six-year-old child, Said here tries to find her own small world by fitting in with her classmates, as a small family. But when she hears one of the students tell the other one that their weight is the same and so they are "twins," Said realizes — from the point of view of a little child — that she is not a member of this family. Such experiences have a strong impact on her self-esteem as she spends the whole year thinking about her difference from the other girls. She starts to hate her body, especially her thighs.

This incident sparks her body-image issues, prompting her to start paying attention to any aspect of her body that is different from her classmates: "Before Chapin, and even perhaps through my first year there, any awareness I had of my body and mind had been positive (I was the tallest! I had the biggest feet and hands! I could read a book fast! I could spell anything! I was a really good drawer!). But by the end of first grade, my self-image had been translated into 'fat, big, hairy, and weird'" (59). Because Said puts this catalogue in quotes, it is as if Said is telling the reader how her childhood self would have described herself. Said's self-esteem falls further as she becomes more aware of her difference: "I became deeply aware of my long arms and legs and began to resent my lanky, undainty form" (59).

Of course, Said develops anorexia not only because of her troubled Arab-American identity, but also because of her obsession with Anglo-American ideals of female beauty and thinness. Hamid says that people can develop anorexia because of poor body image and low self-esteem. For example, if a girl feels she is short, or does not have a distinct enough personality, or if she believes that she is not attractive, she might develop anorexia (11). Hamid also argues that social isolation, for example at school, is another potential cause of anorexia. Hamid says that anorexia can result when a student feels isolated from her classmates, rejected, and depressed, when she feels inferior or insecure, or when she thinks that her colleagues and friends do not understand her or do not give her a chance to express herself. Such a young person might think that nobody pays her any attention at all (Hamid 11). Said experiences these fairly common childhood and adolescent feelings of inferiority, isolation and depression but mainly for a very distinctive set of reasons: it is because of her Arab physical appearance, Arab name, and Arab parents, especially her father as a Palestinian.

During her childhood and youth, Said reveals, she would always try to hide her real identity because she was afraid that people would treat her differently. As a child in the 1980s, Said struggles with her Arabic first name: “As I got older, I realized that my parents had had plenty of pronounceable options in naming their children. They could have given me an Arabic name that was close to an English, I thought, as I considered the Mayas, Salmas, Mariannas, and Dinas in my own family” (80). She wishes that her parents had chosen a more suitable name for her that would not stand out as much in American culture. She sees her name as different not only from those of her classmates but also from those of her Arab relatives. For example, she says here that her paternal aunts’ names “were Rosemarie, Jean, Joyce, and Grace, and [her father’s] mother,

Hilda” (80). Even her parents’ names are Edward and Mariam, which are fairly common in the United States (80). She adds, “[t]wo of my mom’s three brothers had pretty easy names too: Ramzi and Sami were at least names you heard in America once in a while” (80). Said feels that such names help her relatives to hide their identity or blend in easily, an option that she is denied due to her Arabic first name. Said is annoyed that her parents (Edward and Mariam) chose the name the Arabic Najla for her. She believes they did so as a way to embrace their Arab difference, forcing her to bear that difference on a day-to-day basis in ways that they did not have to.

As a child Said repeatedly questions her parents in order to find an alternative to her name:

I found out at some point that my parents had seriously considered calling me Emilia, after both my grandfather Emile and my father’s favorite aunt, Melia, and I was crushed when they told me.

‘I could have been *Emmy*!!! I *hate* you!!!’

I spent hours of my time trying to come up with more adaptable names for myself. If I spelled my name backward, for instance, I could be Spanish (well, kind of)—‘Aljan Dias’! Or, since one of my nicknames was Naj, I could just reverse that and be ‘Jan,’ like Jan Brady. Nothing was more American than *The Brady Bunch*, so I quietly called myself Jan in secret. Then when I was a little older I thought I should go by ‘Lala’ and announced it in a couple of times, but no one ever complied with my wish. Some people thought my name sounded like an inverted version of ‘Angela,’ and I really liked that option. I tried to say my name fast sometimes so people would hear ‘Angela’ and not

follow their ‘Hi, what’s your name?’ with the inevitable ‘*What* is it??? Oh...uh-huh, okay...that’s *interesting...*’ (*Fake smile*) (Said 81)

People’s reaction upon hearing Said’s name, Najla — an expression of astonishment or confusion, followed by a smirk — is another reason why she wants to reject her Arab identity. Her discomfort with being Arab is not confined to her body-image problems but is foregrounded in daily interactions with others, whenever she has to say her name.

As Naber observes, in the wake of 9/11, many second-generation Arab-Americans watched their fathers change their names from “Yacoub,” “Mohammed,” and “Bishara,” for example, to “Jack,” “Mo,” and “Bob” after being called “dirty Arab” or “Palestinian terrorist,” or after customers refused to shop at their stores (Naber 80). Naber also notes, “turmoil in the middle east” has caused many Arab-Americans to want to deny their ethnic background (90). A major factor that causes Said to hide her Arab identity while she is growing up is the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) as well as the war between Israel and Lebanon.

The civil war “turned Beirut into a dangerous, complicated, mad war zone, and shifted its reputation from being ‘the Paris of the Middle East’ to ‘hell on earth’” (20). Then war broke out between Israel and Lebanon in 1982. After the Palestinians escaped as refugees and lived in camps in Lebanon, the Israelis as invaded Lebanon, Said says, “in order to obliterate the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization], which had set up its headquarters in the very neighborhood in which my grandparents lived” (20). Also, America was involved in this war as a supporter of Israel. Lebanon plays a crucial role at this point in young Najla’s life as her grandparents and extended family lived there.

Later in the memoir, she relates how after her father's death, she began to spend a lot of time in Lebanon. Her most frightening experience was when she was in Lebanon during the Israeli invasion of May 2006:

I woke at six a.m. to the familiar sound of bombs. The Israeli invasion of 2006 had officially begun. The airport was the first thing to be bombed. I realized I was trapped, and I was alone. My mom was not there to make decisions for me this time, and my Lebanese family members seemed so accustomed to the sounds of war that they weren't exactly helpful. They could tell exactly how far away a bomb was and what kind of bomb it was; I could only hear that it sounded like it was downstairs.

'No, that's an echo over the mountain; it sounds like it's near Sidon,' my uncle would say, but I had no idea how he was able to figure that out.

'They're bombing the south; they are completely destroying Tyre; they're not bombing us,' an aunt explained. I froze, thinking of the families I had swum near the day before—they must all be either dead, or homeless.

*'Oh my God,'* I shrieked, "but I was *just* there!" (247)

Despite having many Jewish friends and believing that not all Israelis support the war, Said remarks that in these moments of fear, pain and horror a person simply does not understand that.

Reflecting on her experience in Lebanon, Said explains how a person who is being bombed can have only a sense of outrage:

When you are fearful for your life, and you are being bombed by a certain group of people, you're not thinking, *Oh, but I know that not all Israelis agree with this*. There is

no time for that. Just as there is no time for *them* to think that it is not all Lebanese attacking back. And there is no time to think about the Israeli pilot who wishes he weren't in the plane dropping bombs on everybody. All you can think in these situations is, *Fuck everyone!* The summer of 2006 was the first time I had ever experienced real, pure, true hate. (249)

She then acknowledges that her particular circumstances are what enable her to escape and to let go of this hatred:

[I]t was fleeting; it passed. I calmed down and I rationalized. But that was because of a few things: (1) I was able to get *out*; (2) I am lucky enough to know some good people on the "other side"; and (3) I was able to talk on the phone daily with my Jewish therapist in New York. So imagine if you grow up trapped in a conflict region, and you are always fearful, and you are under constant threat of attack. Whether you are an Israeli or an Arab, you are going to continue to hate unless you have an alternative. And many people don't. (Said 249)

This is the closest Said comes in her memoir to an analysis of the crisis in the Middle East. It is not a political analysis but rather a psychological assessment of people in "a conflict region." It is ultimately a bleak vision, as Said concludes that "many people," unlike herself, don't have "an alternative" to hate. Said then recounts how with some difficulty she was able to get out of Lebanon and return to the United States. By the end of her memoir, she seems to feel less guilty about the fact that she has options that most people in the Middle East do not; instead of hiding from her ethnic identity, she devotes herself to exploring it through her performances and writing.

But when she is a child, she has a terrible time trying to cope with the fear that others will judge her based on their perceptions of violence in the Middle East. The war makes Said's self-

consciousness about her ethnic identity worse. She experiences racism from her classmates and their parents. One particularly upsetting incident occurs when she is in fourth grade:

When I went to visit a summer-camp friend in Connecticut, and I heard her mom tell her grandmother that my mom was from “*Leb-a-non*” slowly, deliberately, a little loudly, and followed by an exaggerated smile, I wanted to disappear. *Maybe her grandmother is deaf? Or foreign*, I thought quickly, trying to give her mom the benefit of the doubt, but I somehow knew that the change in pitch in her voice had more to do with a wariness about my being from the country that was at war with “the Jews.” I wished I were dead. I wished people didn’t have to know, that they could just hear my mom’s accent and acknowledge it, but not ask where she was from. As much as they liked her, and me, and all of us, I could tell that many people were disgusted by what they thought about the people from her home country, and I felt ashamed. (Said 103)

The mother of one of Said’s friends thinks she is being subtle by pronouncing “*Leb-a-non*” slowly and loudly, but Najla as a child knows that this is a way of emphasizing her otherness or difference. This makes her feel mortified and uncomfortable. She doesn’t want her Jewish friend’s family, or anyone else, to hate her for being Lebanese. Thus, her reaction to the racism she encounters is to internalize this shame and hatred. She starts to feel ashamed of herself, of Lebanon, and her ethnic identity in general. She feels she must deny every aspect of her identity, from her parents to her name to her own body, and so she starts to wish that she were dead (103).

This childhood experience continues to make her feel ashamed and apologetic:

Of course, I felt especially scared that people would find out that I was from Lebanon when I was in a Jewish home. I would apologize for anything I did and said and try to

keep quiet all the time. I was so very sorry. For what, I had no idea, but the feeling was real. Whenever I walked by the synagogue on 87<sup>th</sup> and Madison on my way to after-school acting classes, I'd keep my head down and pray that no one would see me. I was sorry for that too, but I was never sure why. (Said 103)

Said feels her ethnic identity as a terrible burden. She feels that she has to be “quiet” most of the time in order not to reveal her identity and also not to offend her Jewish friends or put them in a difficult position. She feels ashamed about something she hasn't done and doesn't understand.

Her anxiety about keeping her ethnic identity secret even leads her to lie and pretend that she doesn't know where her parents come from:

It got to the point that whenever anyone would ask where my parents were from, what kind of name I had, or what my brother's name was, I would reply with one stock answer: ‘I don't know.’ My friends never pressed me further when I responded this way, but their parents would often look at me a little strangely, as if they knew I was hiding something, and then, even if they came over to hug me, I would act as shy and elusive as possible, so they would never ask anything more. One day, one of my friend's mothers said to my own, “Where are you from? I asked Najla, but she said she didn't know, that she ‘forgot.’” I felt my mother's eyes burn into my own. (Said 104)

As a child, Said is so afraid that others will reject her if they know that she is Arab that she pretends she doesn't know where her parents are from. She avoids saying the truth because she is aware that people might treat her differently if they knew. She doesn't want a recurrence of the mortification she experienced when her friend's mother made a point of saying that Said's mother is from “*Leb-a-non*” (103).



In 1984, when Said is between the fourth and fifth grades at a sleepaway camp on Cape Cod, she tries to deny that she has won a prize at school because she is afraid that it will draw attention to her and that others will gossip about her for being an Arab. Her parents tell her over the phone that she has won a citywide art contest:

[I]nstead of getting up excitedly and asking for my prize, as most ten-year-olds might do, I replied straightforwardly, working very carefully to keep any hint of a whine out of my voice: ‘I told you. I did not *enter* a contest, so I couldn’t have won one.’ [...] I was certain I had not won anything, because my embarrassment over being Arab had begun to spill over into my self-confidence in every other area of my life; I was definitely not the best artist in my class! (Said 106-7; her emphasis).

Said is terrified of the idea of winning because she thinks if she “became the center of attention for something that wasn’t even that good, then the rest of my classmates would hate me. And then, when they were mean to me, they would tease me and shun me for being Arab, and say, ‘Of course she cheated to win, she’s an *Arab*’” (107; Said’s emphasis). As a child Said has no confidence in her intellect or in her artistic sensibility: “I knew whatever idea I came up with would be stupid or wrong or ‘Arab’ or weird” (107). “Arab” becomes just another way of expressing all of these negative attributes.

Edward Said explained the ways in which Orientalist discourse characterizes Arabs as inferior. In this episode of her childhood, his daughter Najla reveals that she was afraid that Orientalist racism, specifically the notion that Arabs are dishonest, will be directed against her:

Orientalists or Arabs are thereafter shown to be gullible, “devoid of energy and initiative”, much given to “fulsome flattery”, intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals; Orientals cannot walk on either a road or a pavement (their disordered minds fail to understand what the clever European grasps immediately, that roads and pavements are made for walking); Orientals are inveterate liars, they are “lethargic and suspicious,” and in everything oppose the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race. (E. Said 38-39)

It is not clear at this point in her youth whether Najla knows about her father’s theory, but even as a child she understands how Orientalist racism works and she believes she is truly inferior. It is worth noting that she took acting classes from a young age and eventually became an actress. Clearly she had to have been repressing her natural tendencies toward self-expression during all these years of being “quiet.”

As an adolescent, Said starts to look desperately for other ethnic identities that she can claim. In 1984 when she is twelve and in middle school, she watches the actress Alyssa Milano, who is around her age, on a TV show called *Who’s the Boss?*: “[B]ecause this teen actress was Italian, and dark, and still accepted, I tried to find out if I might have some be Italian in me” (Said 118). Her questioning of her parents does not lead to the discovery of any Italian ancestors, but she imagines another possibility:

A few months later, I heard my mother tell a story about a man she’d met who had the same last name we did, but was from Malta. ‘What’s Malta?’ I asked, with oblivious disdain in my voice. ‘It’s a country where they speak a mix of Arabic and Italian. It’s a funny place, in my mind. Because the language they speak is so strange to my ears.’ I

jumped up and ran to my encyclopedia. I was absolutely completely thrilled. From there on, I would say I was Maltese!!! Unfortunately, I was far too shy to ever actually try this, but the possibility of it calmed me internally for a long time to come. (Said 119)

Interestingly, she cannot bring herself to actually say she is Maltese in front of other people, but just knowing that she could calms her feeling of discomfort about being Arab.

In the seventh grade, Said's friend Ashley tells her she is beautiful. This compliment makes her feel somewhat relieved about her difference from others, and when she enters the eighth grade, she has enough self-confidence to confess her father's real identity, but only to those she trusts the most: "By eighth grade, I felt comfortable telling my three closest friends, 'My dad is Palestinian'" (Said 121). Her shame about being Arab, however, continues through middle school, and popular culture continues to have a powerful influence on what she thinks about the dark "otherness" of her Arab identity: "[O]n TV, in all the movies, and even in the comic books I had as a girl, the dark-haired guy was always, always the other, not-as-good-looking guy or 'the bad guy' or 'the dangerous rebel' [...]. In short, the dark-haired, dark-eyed man would always get you into trouble. The WASP culture did nothing but reinforce this idea" (126).

The next section examines the ways in which Najla Said deals with the Orientalist image of the Arab woman as a sensual, exotic figure lacking self-discipline. Said gladly embraces the notion of feminine exoticism associated with this stereotype, using it to her advantage when she reaches her teenage and college years, but at the same time she rejects the association of Arab women with sensual excess, overcompensating with the extreme self-denial and self-discipline of her

eating disorder.

### **Arab Female Beauty: Najla Said's Orientalism**

When Said reaches puberty and enters high school, she starts to see the benefits of looking different from the other girls:

It was in high school that I learned to use my dark looks (fine-tuned with much electrolysis, waxing, and a good pair of tweezers) and even my name to charm the boys I dated. 'Big black eyes like a cow' [the meaning of the name Najla] became an asset. My name was one of the things that made me 'exotic,' 'beautiful,' and 'mysterious.' When I was younger and more awkward-looking, 'weird' had been a more common adjective, but now that I was starting to look like a girl, and was in a school with pubescent boys, perceptions were different. I didn't complain, but I was definitely confused. (Said 130)

Said says she needs these tools (electrolysis, waxing, and tweezers) in order to "use" her "dark looks" to her advantage. In other words, she must get rid of her excessive hairiness, which she associates with being Arab; she must groom and alter her "dark" appearance to make it socially acceptable. Being dark is sexually appealing now that she is in high school, but she needs to work to be able to exploit her "dark looks." Being exotic requires much "fine-tun[ing]." Said emphasizes her ethnicity as a form of sexual appeal in order to attract boys at school. This is a very significant moment in the memoir because here Said not only acknowledges but "use[s]" the stereotype of the "Oriental" woman. She is certainly aware of the sexualized images of Arab women portrayed by Orientalists, which her father Edward Said referred to in *Orientalism*.

As a young adult, Said's perception of her body image and identity are different from her childhood one. She learns to take advantage of her difference to impress others rather than hiding away and being ashamed of her body. She even starts to appreciate the exoticism and beauty of her Arabic name. But Said's "dark looks" only become attractive to her and her peers once they enter puberty and begin to see each other in sexual terms. She says, "One boy told me in eleventh grade: 'You're the kind of girl I'd want to kiss with open eyes. I'd love to be devoured by your intense, deep, dark stare'" (130). While Said seems pleased with this compliment, it sounds Orientalist. It essentializes the interest of the exotic "Other" in addition to the Orientalist sexual interest in the mysterious and exotic beauty of the women from the Orient, especially Arab women. He is sexually impressed by her "intense, deep, dark stare," a phrase that suggests mystery but also the idea that she is some kind of unknowable essence.

This compliment brings back Said's self-confidence, however, and encourages her to consider what is potentially advantageous about being an Arab woman:

I still got teased for my name after that, but the teasing also took on a new, pornographic sort of tone, and I was secure enough now to see that it was funny, not mocking.

'Hey, *mé* Najla *trios*, what's up?'

'What does it take to get into the Naj Mahal?'

Yes, I am aware that these are perfect examples of Orientalism, but to me it was a big step from "Snots-a-lot." It was attention—flattery—from boys, and to an insecure girl like me at the time, that mattered much more than any treatise my father might write.

(131-132)

Here Said emphasizes the connection between pornographic imagery and Orientalism. Her friends use a “pornographic sort of tone” when they twist her name “*mé Najla trios*” into the French phrase “*ménage à trois*,” invoking the notion that she might be willing to participate in a sexual encounter with three persons, with either another woman and a man or with two men. Also when they again destroy her name, connecting it to the Taj Mahal, the emphasis is not on the palace built by a husband to honor his wife, but to focus on the “entering” as in copulation. There is a chance that these boys had little knowledge of the Taj Mahal, where it was located or anything significant about it except that it too is a part of the exotic “East.”

Still, Said’s self-loathing continues:

I set out to find a way to exploit the ‘good’ things about being Arab, to make myself at least *seem* as if I were beautiful, mysterious, and exotic, even if I privately knew otherwise. If eighth and ninth grades had been my horrible, ugly, awkward, and chubby years, I was determined for the remaining years of high school to fashion myself into the ‘beauty’ that friends like Jenny insisted I was. (Said 132)

In the early ’90s when her father becomes more well-known, her “embarrassment” about her ethnicity decreases somewhat: “By this point, in the early ’90s, my dad had become quite famous. [...] I no longer felt the embarrassment in my elegant, cosmopolitan parents that I had felt when I was younger. But that doesn’t mean I was actually comfortable with my own Arab-ness” (132). The Gulf War breaks out (1990) not long before she becomes anorexic, and she has a difficult time handling the elevated political crisis in the Middle East, which leads to many TV appearances for her increasingly famous father. Said does not know how to respond when people ask her about politics, especially at school. Therefore, she tries to avoid the subject entirely: “At

school, I ignored conversations that centered on the war. I didn't care about politics, I said, and I walked away when discussions began. I did my homework instead and began to create schedules and charts for all aspects of my life" (143). Said feels that there is more of a burden on her to be smart and knowledgeable about politics, and to know how to defend the Middle East, and at the same time she wants to avoid being mocked due to her Arab identity. By the time Said starts to cultivate an "exotic" image for herself, one that she feels comfortable with, she develops anorexia because of all the political issues. She is still struggling very much to come to terms with her own identity.

Although her father's fame begins to help her to accept and feel more at peace about being Arab, she still finds it a problem to be living as an Arab in a large community of Jews: "I was still a non-Zionist in a sea of Zionists" (Said 133). She is haunted by feelings that she is discriminated against, faces racism, and must be apologetic to everyone though she has done nothing wrong.

When she is away at Princeton University, Said enjoys the fact that the boys see her as "exotic" or "enigmatic":

I knew that guys were briefly fascinated by me because I looked different and dressed differently from most of the other girls, I had a sort of sad, soulful look in my big brown eyes, and I was the daughter of some larger-than-life intellectual. I was 'exotic' and 'enigmatic' and, therefore, by extension, 'a creative genius with a deep sorrow inside' or something like that. Obviously, a lot of these perceptions were based on my sallow skin, dark hair, and mostly black clothing, and I most certainly played them knowingly. I knew what *Orientalism* was about, and I was perfectly happy to let a nice all-American boy see

what I was like for a minute or two, and then go back to his girlfriend. It was the perfect way to make sure no one got too close to me, truth be told. I had work to do, a mean plan to stick to, and a fragile ego to keep hold of; I didn't want a boyfriend. (Said 196)

Here Said reveals her self-awareness about Orientalism, according to which "Orientals," including Arabs, are "exotic" or "enigmatic" or "other." The irony is that as a young woman at Princeton, Said likes this stereotype and uses it for her own benefit, to be seen as special and distinct from the others. Said states that the young men were fascinated by her because she "looked different," and she emphasizes her dark hair, sallow skin and large brown eyes. Her father's status as a famous Palestinian thinker adds to the "fascination" others feel, of course, but here it just becomes part of Najla's sexual mystery. From a gender perspective her use of Orientalism is very interesting: Said understands what she is doing. As a child she suffered because she "looked different," but as a young woman she uses this difference to her advantage, drawing on the stereotype of the sexually alluring Arab woman. However, this is still a stereotype that essentializes her:

Though the enviable word 'exotic' had begun to replace the word 'weird' as the main adjective people used to describe my difference, I was still not fully accepted as American, and if I were going to live up to being 'exotic,' I had to be perfectly so. So while I did not set out to be anorexic, per se, I did think that being described as 'skinny' would be the best thing to ever happen to me. And after all, in the world in which I lived, wasn't that the best thing to be? (Said 155)

Said here is being critical of the Western world—and specifically the elite New York City social world—in which she lived. Interestingly, she thinks that "being skinny" is the way to be exotic: "if I were going to live up to being 'exotic,' I had to be perfectly so" (155). She starts to conflate



the American ideal of thinness with the sexual appeal of the Oriental woman. Usually when we think of the Orientalist stereotype of the eastern woman, she is depicted as voluptuous. But in her memoir Said redefines what it means to be an “exotic” Arab woman, adapting the stereotype to her own era and context: she combines the image of the languid odalisque with the image of the “creative genius with a deep sorrow inside,” self-consciously projecting herself as the “sad, soulful” daughter of Edward Said (196).

Although Said enjoys being described as “exotic” she is still afraid to sound like a “stereotypical Arab” because this figure is depicted by the Western media as dangerous or terrorist—especially the Muslim Arab: “When some people assumed my avoidance of beer meant I was Muslim, I started wearing a cross sometimes and carrying beer around and spilling it out on the floor to dispel any rumor that I was some ‘stereotypical Arab’” (196). Said is trying like many other Arab-American Christians to separate themselves from being attached to Arab Muslims due to the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes after 9/11. Wearing the cross, even though she is not religious like many Arab-American Christians, allows her to easily blend in with American society, especially those who live in New York City. Though she has been raised in a secular household, at Princeton Said starts wearing the cross to signal to others that she is a different kind of Arab, a safe Arab, and to avoid being labeled a terrorist or called a bomber.

After her father’s death, when she is in her early thirties, Said begins spending more time in Lebanon. At this point, later in the memoir, she describes again her love of Lebanon and how it is as a home to her as much as New York is. She begins spending extended periods of time on

the Lebanese coast with friends who have moved there. For her as an adult, Lebanon becomes a cosmopolitan but also familiar paradise:

I started returning to Lebanon more often, and I began to reconnect with my culture and place in it. As the country flourished and reemerged from the ashes of the fifteen-year civil war, I found myself flourishing too. It took me some years, of course, but I slowly began to be able to nourish myself, not only with the food my relatives fed me but with the love they gave me, and the opportunity to be part of a culture that embraced me fully. For the most part, my trips to Lebanon kept me in the ever-changing, happily rebooming capital of Beirut, with its nightclubs, beach parties, incredible shopping, and relative freedom. The city is, and has always been mixed and international. The Lebanese have always had a particular love of fashion, style, and “the latest thing”—the war has not destroyed this. (204-205)

By the end of her memoir, it is clear that Said has claimed a voice of her own, one that is informed by her father’s theory of Orientalism but that is more her own.

At this point she describes the beauty of the Middle East using Orientalist imagery:

I wish I could articulately explain to the world—and to my younger self!—how the Middle East really works. I wish I could help everyone discover all the wonderful things that I was lucky enough to be able to rediscover about it, all of the little details that make the culture so incredibly addictive and captivating. Ironically, every time I try, I end up sounding like a rabid Orientalist. (Said 205)

Said admits that she sees the beauty of the Middle East, including its cultures, food, languages, people and landscapes from an Orientalist perspective. The irony she foregrounds is that she, to

some extent, is defying her father's argument about the dangers of essentializing and Orientalizing. She admits that she sounds like an Orientalist "captivat[ed]" by an exotic culture:

There is indeed the muezzin, the call to prayer, amazing at twilight, and there is that mysterious, deeply spiritual feel of the air and water (you are almost constantly aware that all the Bible stuff happened *here*). There are the smells and sounds and spices and flavors and carpets and hookahs, I suppose, if you're looking at it that way, but what really grabs you about this very electric, vibrant culture is that everyone who is talking to *you* is talking to *you* and looking at *you* and thinking about *you* and trying to make *you* (another person) feel good and comfortable and good and content. (Said 205-206; her emphasis)

Said is worried that her enthusiastic love for the Middle East might be mistakenly construed as an Orientalist enchantment with the exotic. She acknowledges that she sounds like "a rabid Orientalist" and describes her love of the hookahs, the smell and flavors of the spices, the carpets, and the sound of the muezzin. But she says that such Orientalist imagery is only part of the reality. They are there "I suppose, if you're looking at it that way" (205). So although she includes these Orientalist images, at the same time she tries to emphasize what she believes to be more important: "what really grabs you," she says, are the people of the Middle East, because they give "*you* (another person)" their whole attention in every way. She does not describe the people in Orientalist terms, as untrustworthy or servile. She stresses that their affection and warmth are genuine, and she sees the people of Lebanon, her mother's native country, as especially warm and welcoming.

When she emphasizes the affectionate nature of people in the Middle East, Said notes the various ways in which they use language to express love:

I love the way everybody calls you by a nickname, always. They just constantly multiply, the nicknames. They're often diminutives of your actual name. [...] If not by a nickname, you will most certainly be called by a pet name at least five times an hour. [...] I think that, in a way, it is from the language and the way people use it that life becomes this lovely thing. You share it with other people, you delight in their delight, you want to feed them, love them, laugh with them, make them feel good. It's nice. Also, people just stop by to visit you. And it's not weird, it's lovely! On cell phones, no one has voice mail. If you get a 'missed call,' you call the number back. It is as if the whole idea is to *connect* with other people—not avoid them. I think, from all of that, comes a need to go out and touch and love and dance and eat. It's as if you are on a constant quest to meet everyone. (Said 207; her emphasis)

Said loves how people in Arab countries are “connect[ed]” to each other and suggests that this is something that people in the West do not value as much. She gives examples of how people in Arab countries show that they care for one another and suggests that this culture of hospitality and affection exists in Mediterranean Arab countries just as it exists in Italy or Greece:

I certainly don't know all twenty-two Arab counties. My personal knowledge is only of Lebanon and Palestine. But it seems to me that all of the things that people love about Greece and Italy—you know, the way people drive wherever they want whenever they want in whatever direction they want, the way people get insanely angry for a moment and then five minutes later are kissing you, all of those 'Mediterranean' things—they're true of *all* of the Mediterranean peoples, Mediterranean Arabs included.

We are really not that different from the rest of the world—Arabs. (Said 207-208)

Said ultimately wants her readers to see that Arabs are not “other,” that they can be perceived as lovable in the way that Greeks or Italians are.

In Said’s partially Orientalized vision of the Middle East — and of herself as belonging, at least in part, to it — she finally finds some comfort. Thus, Orientalism to some extent allows her to reconcile her reluctance about being Arab with her love of Lebanon. It is not until after the events of 9/11 that this happens: the turning point in her life is when she starts to be described by others as an Arab-American and must finally make a choice about what that means to her (225, 251). Also, the death of her father in 2003 plays a very big role in increasing her attachment both to the Lebanese and to the Palestinians.

But although she loves the people in Palestine, their hospitality as well as their strong relationships, Said still has more conflicted feelings about Palestine than Lebanon. This is understandable as she has only visited Palestine once. Her experience there is not like the ones she has in Lebanon where she visits to enjoy time with her extended family and friends. She says of the summer of 2002, “My comfort in the Middle East was still very new, and I realized now that at that time it was a comfort that I had felt only in and around the urban, cosmopolitan areas of Beirut” (Said 209). When she goes to the Lebanon-Israel border, near the coast, she feels “scared”: “My heart pounded loudly in my chest. I was suddenly scared, and I felt the same constricted ‘I don’t belong here’ feeling I had felt when I had gone to Palestine, eight years earlier” (209).

The crisis or climax of the narrative in Said's memoir occurs in Palestine. Said's loathing of her Arab body and her anorexia nervosa reach a crisis during her first and only visit to Palestine. She decides to stop eating when she is seventeen, after her father is diagnosed with chronic lymphatic leukemia: "the main thing you need to know for now is that I stopped eating anything with a gram of fat in it' (how very early '90s) somewhere between ninth and tenth grades. The fall of my senior year, when we found out about leukemia, kicked my anorexia into high gear" (Said 154). It is hard for Said to hear about her father's illness, especially in this particular phase of her life. It is hard for her to contend with so many new things at the same time: "The fear I felt was devastating. Inside, I still feel like a five-year-old. I had barely gotten my footing in the world, and now I felt I was slipping. I was confronting racism, death, sex, and being on my own in the world for the first time; it was too much, too fast. I felt so desperately out of control of everything" (153). As Said loses control she can't make good decisions; she even keeps only six "arbitrary" applications for college and throws away the rest (153). Her father's illness has a great effect upon her, and this leads to the development of her anorexia: "I was so devastated by the fact that my daddy might die that I began to severely strict what I ate, so much that I might die too. I wanted to take on his illness, and share it with him. I was depressed, and wanted to disappear. Anorexia, after all, is just a slow form of suicide" (154). Said wants to starve herself in solidarity with her father. She wants to suffer and die slowly. As Said is still only a teenager, she feels hopeless that she can help her father or do anything good to cheer him up. The only thing she feels she can control is to control herself by starving. In this way, Said thinks she can feel the pain of her father.

However, her reason for starving herself is not only her father's illness. It is something she has been "building toward": "And then I made the brilliant decision to just stop eating. In truth, this was something I had been building toward since childhood and middle school, with my debilitating insecurities about my appearance and body size, but it was in high school, most markedly my junior and senior years, that I put actual starvation into successful practice" (153). She also wants to draw attention to herself: "Ironically, though, there was another aspect to it that was almost completely opposite: I knew from experience that being sick or 'having a diagnosis' would get me noticed, and give me an identity (I was *sort of* popular, *sort of* pretty, *sort of* athletic, *sort of* smart, *sort of* good at art, and soon, but I *shone* at nothing)" (154-55; Said's emphasis). Said wants to be noticed and is about to leave for university at Princeton. Hence, this is a very important time of her life in terms of constructing her identity, as she thinks being anorexic or skinny would cover her imperfections or make up for her indistinctness. Starving herself, even if she claims that it's to feel the suffering of her father, helps her to reach her goal of being noticed:

By the end of my high school tenure I was five feet seven inches and weighed 105 pounds. People noticed, but my parents insisted (to themselves more than anyone) that it was a phase that all teenagers go through, and that was that. [...] I ate practically nothing, and organized my day around when and where I would do so. Popular girls envied me. People worried behind my back. I loved it. (155-56)

Said loves the idea that she gets the attention of others, but still she doesn't get the attention of her father.

Many factors play a role in why she wants her father's attention; one of them is that she feels that her brother, Wadie, has all the attention in the family because he is so intellectual and accomplished: "Wadie was a junior professional tennis player, and a boy, and the skinny one 'who could eat anything and never get fat!' He was the funny one. The non-neurotic one, the one my mom worried about if he didn't come home by five p.m, and the one who was learning Arabic" (155). After she graduates from Trinity, in June of 1992, she continues to feel burdened by her inability to achieve great things like her brother:

Meanwhile, Wadie, now a sophomore at Princeton, seemed to embrace and understand his identity more each year. He had grown into a brilliant young man in high school, it had seemed to me that while I agonized over my school work and put in hours upon hours of effort, Wadie was able to play tennis every single day, watch basketball, play video games, talk on phone, and still get excellent grades and gain early admission to Princeton. Moreover, he had completely transformed from a typical American teenager into a charming, serious student of Arabic language and literature. I was convinced, when this transformation occurred at the beginning of his college tenure, that Wadie had planned it just to piss me off. It felt as though he had completely betrayed me. He had joined my parents comfortably straddling the line between 'East' and 'West,' and had left me standing alone and lost, in America. (Said 157-158)

Said is anxious about her intellectual capacity compared with her famous father. She feels that Wadie is more capable of continuing her father's dreams and legacy. Wadie seems closer to her parents, especially her father. She worries that she might disappoint her father by not being as good as her brother. This contributes to her desire to do something distinctive so that her father will pay more attention to her:



He was also, I am not going to lie to you, the son in an Arab family, and no matter how unconventional and mixed-up we were, I knew that for my dad the return to Palestine was a lot more about him and my brother bonding that it was about me and my edification. Sure, my daddy adored me, but I was kind of like his little doll. Little girls like me didn't need to know about serious things; that was the message I received. And it was one of the reasons I hadn't felt more motivated to learn about my culture. Wadie, the son, was going to carry on our name; why should 'little Naj' be burdened with the knowledge of her history? This was clearly the family's thinking, and for much too long, I accepted it.

(159)

This tells us so much about Said. In addition to being smart and more interested in politics, Wadie is the son in an Arab family, the one who will carry the name of the family. This scenario is typical in Arab culture as the son carries on the ancestral line. Therefore, her brother (the son) has more of a burden on his shoulders to deal with the serious issues, such as the political issues and returning to Palestine. To her family, that doesn't mean that she is less than him. They see her as the little pampered girl who doesn't have to bother herself with serious matters. Most of the time, in Arab culture usually the elder brothers and sisters bear responsibility for more serious issues in the family than the younger, pampered ones.

In addition to these issues of gender and culture in her Arab family, Said must contend with anti-Arab sentiments in American culture. Hamid argues that anorexia is due to several factors, including emotional problems such as feelings of guilt or frequent feelings of depression (10). Guilt and depression are common problems that Arab-American children or teenagers face while living in the United States. Said deals with her anxiety about being Arab in New York City,

surrounded by so many Jewish people who support Israel. Describing her early schooling, she says that the people on “the Upper West Side were generally more liberal, more intellectual, and more Jewish,” and many of her classmates were Jewish: “Preschool had introduced me to some Jewish friends, and the candles and the dreidels” (44, 56). She grows up in a place dominated by Jewish-American culture. She celebrates Hanukkah during her first year of nursery school: “At the Hanukkah party, we ate potato latkes on blue table cloths; we heard the story of Judas Maccabeus and learned the dreidel song. Everyone got a dreidel (I still have mine), and the girls were given fans, and the boys, plastic swords” (54). Also, her best friend, Jenny, is Jewish: “Jenny was my gateway, and throughout high school I became more and more absorbed in the world of Jewish culture. By the time I finished high school, I was far more likely to say ‘Oy vey’ and ‘I’m shvitzing’ and a whole slew other Yiddish words before I’d dare utter a word of Arabic, I’d kissed more Jewish boys than gentiles” (128). She says “I knew more African and French songs than English ones, and more about origami, Chinese new year, and the Children of Israel than I did about myself” (54). She is even seen as a Sephardic Jew by her friends’ Jewish families (128).

Like other oppressed or marginalized people, Said internalizes the hatred of Arabs that she senses in her surroundings, turning on herself as an Arab-American, fixating on the aspects of her appearance that she feels set her apart as Arab. She feels apologetic for being Arab and always tries to disappear and not draw attention to herself. At the same time, developing anorexia is a cry for help and a way to get attention by suffering. Throughout her memoir she focuses on her difficulty figuring out who she is and where she belongs. By disappearing, or starving herself, she nullifies the whole question. She feels guilty for not being able to relate to what happens in Palestine and to the Palestinians, especially the children.

By the time Said visits Palestine with her family, in 1992 when she is eighteen years old, her anorexia is very serious. She cares about the suffering of Palestinians because it is the land and the people of her father and ancestors, and thus it is hers as well. She describes the people who live in Gaza: “The inside of the house was immaculate and beautifully decorated, even though outside was stinky and dirty. I tried to wrap my teenage head around the existence of such a place in the world, where people are trapped like caged animals in the filthiest zoo on earth, while I somehow got to prance around in suede shoes and \$150 skirts and then get on a plane and go home” (Said 173). The difficulty of their life affects her; she is shocked at seeing such destitute people who don’t have the basics of a good life. Her father’s words to her, the same words he uses in an article he writes during the trip, make her feel guilty about the people in Gaza:

*I didn’t hear a single hopeful thing in the two hours I was with the men. One of them spoke of having spent seventeen years in jail, of his children sick, of relatives destitute. There was a lot of anger. The phrase I kept hearing was “mawt batiq,” slow death. There seemed to be considerable animus against West Bankers, who were variously characterized by Gazans as spoiled, or privileged, or insensitive. We are forgotten, they all said, and because of the unimaginably difficult job of dramatically (or even slightly) improving the general lot of Gazans, I was repeatedly enjoined at least not to forget.*  
(Said 172-3; her italics)

This pain and suffering of those who live in Gaza makes Said feel guilty, as she is supposed to belong to this people. Consequently, she projects her guilt and confusion onto her body.

When Said describes how she feels when she visits Palestine, her ancestors' homeland, she identifies herself with the children in Gaza and emphasizes the fact that she wants to become a child once again. Of course, starving herself is a way of returning to childhood; even her menstruation stops. Thus, starving herself helps her to identify with the Palestinian children:

I can try to conjure a picture of Gaza, but all I really remember of that day is a feeling. [...] [T]here was a small piece of fruit given to me by one of the young girls at the house, which I pretended to bite into, and chew, and swallow. She had plucked it off a tree near the porch for me, and then chose a second one for herself. She popped hers into her mouth and smiled. All that I noticed was the layer of filthy dust that covered the one she had given me. I didn't want to eat it because of the (eight?) calories, but I also wondered how anyone could eat any piece of fruit without washing it. (173)

When the poor little girl gives Said an apple after plucking it off a tree, and then chooses a second one for herself, Said gets emotional. This shows the hospitality of Arab culture, in which respecting and feeding the guest is very important. This is exemplified when the girl gives her the apple first and only then takes one for herself. If there were only one, she would give it to Said. An expression Arabs always use when talking to guests is *Albait baitak* which means "My home is your home." Said appreciates the hospitality of these people even though they do not have much to give and have a harsh life. She compares herself to this girl who has a poor life that forces her to eat fruit without washing it. While the people of Gaza are used to such hard times of siege, when there is no water or food, and train themselves from childhood to adapt to difficult living conditions, Said has a luxurious life and complains about "eight calories" while others suffer. The contrast between her circumstances and theirs makes her feel that she has to find a way to connect to the children of Gaza and Palestine.

During her visit to Palestine, Said starts to crave suffering. She wants to feel the pain of the Palestinian children:

My need to feel real pain and suffering intensified on the drive back to Jerusalem. I turned on my Walkman, and I played one song over and over and over. [...] It seemed to speak to every single inexpressible thing I was feeling inside me at that moment: all my teenage angst, my desire to share in my father's suffering from cancer, and now, my intense need to feel the pain of these people. [...] [T]here I was, in the land of 'our Lord and savior' and I actually wanted to become some sort of ascetic, crucified, suffering martyr. I wanted to stop being so conspicuous, I wanted to go away, I wanted to scream loudly, '*Why is all this happening?*' but I had no voice. My body had become my voice. Starvation, more than ever, would become my language. (174)

Here Said relies on Christian imagery of self-sacrifice and feeling the pain of others, despite the fact that she is a non-practicing Christian and was raised in a secular family. Her use of Christian imagery of martyrdom reflects her awareness of her father's illness—at this point he has cancer, and she wants to suffer for him. This imagery also stems from the original religion of her father as he was a Christian—at least ethnically. The song that she plays reinforces this imagery: "And Tori Amos sang 'Why do we crucify ourselves' in my ears, until I was gasping for air, still trying not to cry" (174). Because she doesn't have the political engagement of her father as a way to speak her mind, Said uses her body to become her language and, thus, turns her feeling of pain, anger, and guilt back upon herself. Furthermore, she blames herself for being born in a comfortable life, free from the war, pain and suffering that her Palestinian counterparts must endure: "A million thoughts began racing through my head. I wanted to know why I was born

lucky; I wanted to severely punish myself for being born lucky. Why didn't I have to live here? Why was I able to pass as a Jew if I wanted? Why did I get to go to the best schools in the world? And why despite all of this, did I still feel awful?" (175). Her anorexia worsens while she is visiting Palestine, and by this point in her memoir we can see that it is her Palestinian heritage that causes her the most anxiety.

When the Saids return to New York, her parents are shocked when the doctor tells them to send Najla to the hospital instead of to Princeton: "Their faces froze in confusion. They desperately wanted to believe I was still normal, and were half hoping that a little pill or something would fix me. They looked at [the doctor] pleadingly" (186). Said's parents think that her weight loss is due to a diet, and that it is normal: "Originally, my parents and brother had thought my diet fixation was 'a teenage girl thing' that I'd outgrow" (185). Their dismay at the diagnosis seems to give Said some satisfaction: "And perversely, for the first time in a long time, I felt acknowledged" (187). One of the reasons for Said's anorexia is to draw her parents' attention towards her. She feels her brother Wadie has all the attention. Her anorexia makes her feel "acknowledged," and her parents' worry makes her feel more loved and noticed. As times goes on, with the care of her parents and after the death of her father, she gets better. But after this point in the memoir, just prior to her departure for Princeton, Said does not address the status of her anorexia nervosa, and we can only assume she has not developed it again.

Najla Said opens her memoir by declaring herself to be "a Palestinian-Lebanese-American Christian woman" (1). Through her stage show and memoir, she tries to show others what it is like to be an Arab-American woman who is also the daughter of one of the most famous Arab

intellectuals in history. Said seems a bit more comfortable with Orientalist notions of place and gender than we might expect, given her father's work. Although she is an Arab-American, she still cannot avoid thinking to a certain extent in Orientalist terms. Living in Western culture and being influenced by it has a powerful impact on her point of view of the Arab world and its culture.

By the end of her memoir, Said seems to feel less guilty about the fact that she has options that most people in the Middle East do not have, especially the Palestinians. Instead of hiding her ethnic identity, she devotes herself to exploring its complexity through performance and writing. Said ultimately resolves her "confused" identity by embracing "otherness" as her own identity. She seeks out solidarity with others whose ethnic and national identities do not tell a simple story. Said still does not seem to have a clear notion of what being Palestinian means to her, saying only that "'Palestine,' that word, makes me want to cry" (253). At this moment in her life, she is a New Yorker whose heart is also in Lebanon. She lives in two worlds. It seems that she is still looking for Palestine, or perhaps she has accepted that she will never really find it.

Of all the terms that have been used to describe Arab-Muslim women, the one that strikes me the most is "fluid." This term used by Jarmakani (157) is, I think, an apt description of the status of millions of women—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and perhaps many other religions. Our image of ourselves is changing because of what we are learning about ourselves, our cultures, and the changing world in which we live. We influence others, and we are influenced by others. This interactive process helps us to grow in self-awareness. This doesn't mean that all of us will undergo a tsunami of change, but the contemporary woman is anything but static. What I have

learned about the world, socio-religious cultures, and myself from classroom instructions, readings, and research has all led me to the conclusion that I, as a Jordanian woman, and millions of women like me are in transition. This does not mean that we will necessarily change. In fact, we may become more committed to our beliefs and cultural practices, but we may also change many of our ideas, even values. The point is, who we are as persons—intellectual, social, cultural, religious, and physical—is changing. But this fluidity is a sign of strength, and I think Najla Said might agree with this, though it took her many years to realize it. In some ways, this concept of a fluid identity is similar to the sense of “otherness” which Said ultimately embraces.



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